

TITLE

Low-voltage IC-circuit.

AREA OF THE INVENTION

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The invention concerns a low-voltage IC-circuit construction with low power consumption.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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Starting with the 0.35 μ m generation, CMOS scaling has changed from a constant-voltage regime with a nominal supply voltage of 5V to a constant-field regime where the supply voltage is being reduced in concert with geometric dimensions with each process generation. We are thus likely to see more and more CMOS circuits in the future that must operate with a supply voltage below that of the usual sources of electrical energy. As an example, consider a 1.2V battery cell that feeds a low-power low-voltage circuit operating at a mere 0.6V. The most obvious solution is to use a voltage converter in down mode. While this is possible, the converter is costly, space consuming, and also has its own power dissipation. Partitioning the overall IC into two or more sub-circuits and connecting them in series does away with the down converter because the IC can so be powered from a supply with a higher voltage than what is suitable for an individual sub-circuit. US Patent 6'479'974 further proposes to adjust the voltages across the various sub-circuits with the aid of controllable current sources that bleed off excess voltage. The invention improves on the energy-efficiency and on the simplicity of series-connected power schemes by doing the voltage balancing with capacitor switching instead.

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According to US Patent 6'479'974, the circuit on the IC is partitioned into power-consuming sub-circuits each of which is to be fed with its own supply voltage and the sub-circuits are then connected in series. This effectively cuts the supply voltage for each sub-circuit. In this way it becomes possible to use a battery cell with a high voltage to feed a low voltage circuit without the need to provide the usual down converter. As voltage drops across the individual sub-circuits will tend to distribute unevenly because

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current drains in the various workload sub-circuits are never quite the same, US Patent 6'479'974 proposes to compensate for this undesirable effect by connecting a regulator in parallel with each sub-circuit. A controlled current source in each regulator adjusts its current drain such as to maintain a fixed voltage across its own terminals and, hence,
5 across the power-consuming sub-circuit as well. An extra central unit is utilized to coordinate the various regulators such that at least one of them draws zero current thereby minimizing the collective current drain from the power supply.

An alternative embodiment of US Patent 6'479'974 proposes to adjust switching
10 activities in the workload sub-circuits at run time such as to balance their supply currents and, hence, also the voltage drops across them. The patent even suggests the duplication of logic circuitry to provide for sufficient headroom for activity adjustments.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

15 Yet, however much care is taken in the prior art technique, it cannot be ensured that the subcircuit's respective current drains always match. Any imbalance implies that power is being wasted for nothing. This is because an imbalance either causes one or more of the regulators to carry a nonzero current or gives rise to redundant switching activities.

20 The invention aims at energy saving in a power supply for an IC partitioned into two or more sub-circuits connected in series.

This is achieved with an IC-circuit construction where the circuit is partitioned into
25 power consuming sub-circuits which each has to receive a supply voltage, and where the sub-circuits are connected in series and where a control-circuit is provided in order to balance the voltage drops across the power consuming sub-circuits whereby constant voltage-drops over the sub-circuits are maintained, and where ground voltage level in the power supply of a first sub-circuit is used as the supply voltage level in a second sub-
30 circuit. According to the invention the control circuit comprises a first buffer capacitor coupled in parallel over the supply voltage level and ground voltage level of the first sub-circuit and a second buffer capacitor coupled in parallel over the supply voltage level and the ground voltage level of the second sub-circuit, whereby means for maintaining a

uniform voltage drop over the first and the second buffer capacitor comprises at least one bucket capacitor which is alternately coupled in parallel over the first and the second buffer capacitor through a switching system controlled by a toggling signal.

5 In this way it becomes possible to drive the sub-circuits with very little energy loss, and further this allows balanced voltages to be obtained with no control loops and without complicated activity monitoring and/or adjusting mechanisms in the means for maintaining a uniform voltage drop. The provision of the buffer capacitors will help to stabilize the voltage over the two sub-circuits by absorbing fast transients in the current
10 consumption. The alternately coupled bucket capacitor is a very simple and elegant way of maintaining a uniform voltage drop over the two buffer capacitors and, hence, also the two sub-circuits. Also this solution recycles excess energy and is thus an energy-efficient way of balancing the voltage drops across the two power-consuming workload sub-circuits. In fact, losses would be almost zero were it not for voltage drops across the
15 transistors that act as switches.

In an alternative embodiment of the invention, there are two bucket capacitors that get switched at the same time such as to alternately couple to the first and the second buffer capacitor respectively. This solution is somewhat more complicated than the solution
20 with only one bucket capacitor, but on the other hand it will assure an even smaller ripple in the supply voltages to the two sub-circuits.

Preferably the switches for alternately coupling the bucket capacitors are controlled by a free-running oscillator, a clock, or some other suitable signal that toggles at a sufficient
25 rate to allow for a near-perfect voltage balance. Having the switching occur in an autonomous manner is sufficient because of the self-regulatory function of the stabilizer circuit and is a great advantage over more complex schemes that involve control loops. The simplicity keeps the necessary circuit overhead down and should make it possible to design cheaper IC units.

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In an embodiment of the invention, the midpoint stabilizer is designed such as to deliberately maintain different voltage drops across the sub-circuits.

The IC circuits may be digital, analog or mixed signal circuits.

Further various sub-circuits may be located on the same chip or on each their chip according to the particular task at hand.

- 5 Three or more sub-circuits can be powered in series with one or more bucket capacitors being switched around to balance the voltages across them.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

- 10 Fig. 1 is an overall circuit arrangement according to the invention,
Figs. 2 and 3 are different embodiments of the midpoint stabilizers.

DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

- 15 The overall circuit organization is shown in fig. 1. Here two complementary subsets of the payload circuit are connected in series. The first sub-circuit 1 of the payload circuitry has a power supply line 2, which maintains the voltage level of VBB and a ground connection 3, which is to maintain voltage level VHH. The ground connection 3 is also routed to the midpoint stabilizer 4 and functions as power supply line to the further sub-
20 circuit 6 of the payload circuitry. This sub-circuit 6 further has a ground connection 7 with the voltage level of GND. The midpoint stabilizer 4 ensures that the voltage in the power supply line 3 that connects sub-circuit 1 to sub-circuit 6 remains constant and at the midpoint between the battery supply voltage VBB and the ground level GND. Level shifters 8 are mandatory wherever a signal crosses over from the lower partition to the
25 upper partition or vice versa. Depending on the peripheral voltage levels, level-shifters 9 are likely to be required on input and output signals as well.

- Balancing the voltage drops across the two sub-circuits 1,6 in fig. 1 of the payload circuit requires that they exhibit identical current drains and activity profiles. Of course, one
30 will strive to obtain a good balance during the design process, yet matching the two sub-circuits statically does not suffice because supply currents inevitably vary over time. Buffer capacitors help to absorb brief current surges. The residual disparities are

compensated for by a midpoint stabilizer circuit 4. Two alternative circuits are proposed according to figs. 2 and 3 and explained in the following.

Each of figs 2 or 3 fits into fig.1 as midpoint stabilizer circuit 4 and connects by way of
5 common circuit nodes including the three voltage levels VBB, VHH and GND through lines 2,3 and 7 respectively. All implementations share the goal of making the voltages across the two payload circuits 1 and 6 in fig.1 the same.

The circuits of figs. 2 and 3 include no dissipative shunts in their circuits as is otherwise
10 known from the prior art. Instead, they feature extra capacitors that act as buckets for charge transfer. Fig. 2 includes one such bucket capacitor 20 that gets rapidly switched back and forth between the upper and lower payload circuit as the two-throw switches 25 and 28 alternate between their two stable positions. The bucket capacitor 20 accepts extra charge at the higher of the two voltages (VBB-VHH and VHH-GND) and releases
15 that charge at the lower voltage thereby compensating for any momentary difference in the current drains of the two payload circuits. Fig. 3 is more sophisticated in that it includes two such bucket capacitors 21 and 22 and four switches 35, 36, 37 and 38. The advantage is that one can obtain the same low supply voltage ripple with smaller buffer capacitors because one of the buckets picks up charge at the higher voltage while the
20 other one releases charge at the lower level at any time. Again, switches 25 and 28 in fig. 2 and 35, 36, 37 and 38 in fig. 3 may or may not be implemented with the aid of transistors (field-effect transistor FET or bipolar junction transistor BJT, switches in micromechanical technologies, or any other electrically controlled devices).

25 A point that deserves special attention is the fact that all switches in figs. 2 and 3 can be controlled by a free-running oscillator 27, a clock, or some other signal that toggles frequently enough. There is no need to sense and compare the supply voltages across the payload circuits as the rapid switching of the bucket capacitors will naturally tend to make them equal, provided there is no excessive disparity in the respective current
30 consumptions of the two payload circuits.

Proposals in fig. 2 and 3 are particularly attractive because they do not make use of any dissipative shunts but recycle excess energy with the aid of capacitors that get switched

from the lower partition to the upper one and back again. Also they function in a self-regulating way as there is no need to steer the switching of those charge buckets except, possibly, for avoiding unnecessary switching activity. Though inferior in terms of performance to fig. 3, the solution presented in fig. 2 may be a reasonable compromise
5 between energy efficiency, supply ripple and circuit overhead (i.e. cost) in some situations.